

## Chapter 4 Can't Fall Asleep Without Me Around

In the late afternoon, Noreen had just slipped into fresh clothes when the door burst open without warning.

Her head snapped around instinctively, and there stood Caiden, framed by the doorway.

Her lips parted as if she meant to speak, but the words never came.

"It's time to leave. Are you ready?" Caiden pressed, his eyes settling on her with a steady weight.

She wore a misty blue dress so soft it seemed to dissolve into the pale light around her. With every small movement, the silk shimmered faintly, catching the air like water rippling under sunlight.

A delicate slit traced up one side, revealing a fleeting flash of smooth skin that made a stunning contrast with the emerald pendant resting at her neck.

The stone curved perfectly against the gentle slope of her collarbone, rising and falling in time with her measured breaths, gleaming like a tranquil lake beneath a moonlit sky.

Caiden's gaze lingered on the necklace a heartbeat too long, his expression unreadable.

"It looks good on you," he murmured, the rasp in his voice unexpectedly rough.

"Let's go," Noreen slung her bag over her shoulder and stepped through the doorway.

Caiden inclined his head slightly, every inch of him—his tailored suit, his composed posture—exactly as it had been on their wedding day three years earlier. Back then, he would've reached over to smooth a stray lock from her hair. Now, he stood deliberately apart, the two of them casting separate silhouettes across the sunlit floor.

She trailed after him at an unhurried pace, Greta's soft voice from that

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morning looping in her mind: "He still holds you in his heart." Yet here they  
were, bathed in the same light, close enough to touch but worlds away.

Tilting her chin, she caught sight of him standing with the sun blazing  
behind his back, his figure rimmed with gold. His expression was hidden in  
shadow—just as it had been for the past two years. Always on the far  
side of the light. Always unreachable.

Her eyes dropped to his hand hanging loosely at his side.

Those long, steady fingers had once clasped hers through burning fevers,  
rubbed soothing circles on her back when storms rattled the windows,  
and trembled when sliding the wedding band onto her finger.

Now, that same hand hung mere inches away, yet there might as well  
have been an ocean between them.

Noreen's fingers gave a faint, involuntary twitch, her pulse thudding so  
hard it echoed in her ears.

For the first time in two long years, a reckless urge surged through her—  
to close the distance and reach for him.

The realization made her shoulders stiffen, her breaths turning small and  
shallow.

Her hand began to rise, trembling slightly, but just as her fingertips  
hovered near Caiden's, the shrill ring of his phone split the fragile silence.

Caiden stilled. The name "Jessica" lit up the screen, and the sight struck  
Noreen like a blow she hadn't braced for.

Her hand froze midair before curling back toward herself, fingers knotting  
around the hem of her dress until the fabric creased.

The fragile courage that had flickered to life only seconds earlier  
collapsed, leaving a hollow ache blooming in its wake.

When Caiden answered the call, his voice carried a warmth she hadn't  
heard directed at her in years. The gentle lilt crushed the last trace of  
hope clinging to her chest.

The call was brief. Once Caiden ended it, he looked at Noreen with a  
composed expression that only widened the gulf between them. "Have  
the driver take you there," he said evenly. "I need to pick up Jessica."

Noreen didn't question why Jessica would be at the gathering; she simply  
inclined her head. "Alright. Go on ahead."

Caiden's gaze lingered on her for a heartbeat before he turned toward the car. Just as he reached it, her voice cut through the quiet. "Will you be back tonight?"

A faint curve tugged at his lips, barely there. "What, can't fall asleep without me around?"

Her mouth pressed into a thin line as she went on, "I have something to talk to you about."

The flicker of amusement in his eyes dimmed. "Let's save this for later."

With that, he climbed into the car and pulled away, leaving her standing in the stillness of the driveway.

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When Noreen reached the Evans Mansion, she found Caiden and Jessica already settled inside.

Warm laughter spilled through the slightly open door, wrapping the place in an easy, familial glow. She froze on the threshold, unsure if stepping in would shatter that harmony.

With her parents gone since childhood, she had never experienced the comfort of a lively, loving household.

A quiet ache pulsed in her chest—of course she envied them.

Beneath the mellow yellow lights, Caiden leaned in, his usually cool face softened by a rare smile as he listened to Jessica.

Jessica, in a delicate yellow gown, glowed beneath that light, her every movement framed by the Evans family's easy affection.

Ivy reached over with a gentle laugh, setting another piece of food on Jessica's plate, while Caiden's father, Albert Evans, wore an unusually gentle expression.

For Noreen, the scene felt like peering through a window into a world she didn't belong to—an intimate family dinner she had no rightful place in.

"Noreen, you're here," Albert finally said, glancing up with a polite, measured smile.

Every pair of eyes turned toward her, and in an instant, the cheerful chatter dissolved into brittle silence.



Caiden straightened in his chair, the warmth still lingering on his face, but a subtle hesitation flickered through his smile the instant their eyes met.

Noreen's fingers clenched tighter around the gift bag, but she kept her expression soft, the corners of her lips lifting into a quiet, polite smile as she made her way inside.

"Sorry I took so long," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

Jessica perked up immediately, waving her over with unrestrained enthusiasm. "Noreen, come sit with me!"

Instead of taking the open seat, Noreen drifted toward the corner, her movements composed but distant.

Caiden's gaze flicked to her, pausing briefly on the necklace glinting against her collarbone before he looked away as if it held no meaning at all.

For Noreen, the Evans family dinner felt less like a warm gathering and more like a quiet trial.

Halfway through the evening, she slipped out quietly to breathe, the cold air outside offering a small reprieve. She hadn't gone far before Ivy followed her.

For a brief moment, Ivy's attention fixed on the necklace around Noreen's neck, something unreadable flickering through her eyes before she smoothed it away.